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## John Brown: the Legend Revisited

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*John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, by Merrill D. Petersen. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002. xi, 172 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$23.95 cloth.

Reviewer G. Galin Berrier is adjunct instructor in history at Des Moines Area Community College. He is the author of the chapter, "The Underground Railroad in Iowa," in *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000* (2001).

Merrill D. Petersen describes his latest book as "an extended meditation on the life of John Brown and his place in American thought and imagination from the time of his death in 1859 to the near-present" (xi). Readers of his earlier works, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960) and *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994) will not expect this slim volume to be a comprehensive biography of John Brown and his times. Rather, it is a study of the *meaning* of the man and his legend for historians, novelists, artists, poets, playwrights, and journalists, and how that meaning has changed dramatically from one era to another.

Petersen begins his meditation with a chapter on "the John Brown epoch," in which he briefly sketches Brown's life, particularly the raid on Harper's Ferry, his trial and execution, and contemporary journalistic and literary responses to these dramatic events. Chapter two, "Faces and Places of the Hero," deals with the earliest attempts to address the meaning of John Brown, including the first biography of him, by the Scottish-born abolitionist and journalist James Redpath. That chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the ways "the young state of Iowa figured prominently in John Brown's life" (58). Chapter three, "The Kansas Imbroglio," features a discussion of the intense controversies over John Brown's legacy in Kansas, including discussions of both Franklin B. Sanborn's *Life and Letters of John Brown* (1885) and Richard J. Hinton's *John Brown and His Men* (1894). Chapter four, "The Great Biography," is devoted largely to Oswald Garrison Villard's *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910), which Petersen characterizes as "the greatest American historical biography yet written" to that time (86). It remains one of the best sources for John Brown's trek across Iowa in the winter of 1858-59. In chapter five, "Kaleidoscope," Petersen discusses interpretations of John Brown in the first half of the twentieth century, including Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* (1928) and what is by far the most critical biography, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-six* (1942) by Kansas historian James C. Malin, whom Petersen characterizes as "a conscientious investigator" who "has no sympathy whatsoever for John Brown" and who does not really try to understand him (123). In his concluding chapter, "John Brown Redivivus," Petersen evaluates the more recent treatments of John Brown, including Stephen B. Oates's fine *To Purge This*

*Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (1970, 1984), a work in the tradition of Villard notable for "emphasizing the power of Calvinist Christianity in Brown's life" (156) and for demonstrating Malin "to be grossly biased against Brown" (157). Near the end of that chapter, Petersen discusses *John Brown's Holy War* (2000), a PBS documentary film that in ninety minutes barely manages to mention that John Brown ever visited Iowa.

Dorothy Schwieder has aptly characterized Iowa as "the Middle Land," and so it is as well in the life and legend of John Brown. Although he seems to have been in Iowa a half-dozen times between the fall of 1855 and the winter of 1858–59, it was the "middle land" across which he traveled from the violence of "Bleeding Kansas" to the raid on Harper's Ferry. Both contemporaries and posterity have been mesmerized by those dramatic events and have neglected the stern, Bible-quoting abolitionist who "wherever he lived . . . aided in the work of guiding fugitive slaves to freedom under the North Star" (4). Petersen's brief summary of Brown's trip across Iowa with eleven fugitive slaves (twelve, counting an infant born in Kansas) from Missouri in the winter of 1858–59 is essentially accurate, although he incorrectly locates Josiah B. Grinnell in Springdale in 1859 rather than in his namesake town of Grinnell.

Iowa readers will find in Petersen's book an elegantly written introduction to the historical, literary, and artistic impact of John Brown and his legend on his own and subsequent generations, but will need to look elsewhere for the full story of John Brown in Iowa. One classic account of a century ago, incorrectly cited by Petersen (58, n. 44), is Irving B. Richman (not "Richmond"), *John Brown among the Quakers, and Other Sketches* (1904).

*Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor: The Civil War Letters of a Union Soldier and His Wife*, edited by Richard L. Kiper. Modern War Studies. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xii, 448 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Kenneth L. Lyftogt is a lecturer in history at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of *From Blue Mills to Columbia: Cedar Falls and the Civil War* (1993) and editor of *Left for Dixie: The Civil War Diary of John Rath* (1993).

The Civil War lends itself equally to history, fiction, poetry, and music. America's best writers have used their talents in service of that conflict. They can do so because they believe that they know the people of the time and understand their tragedy and their glory. They know them because so many of those involved in the war were literate people,

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